

viva

BEE GOOD

UNTIL RECENTLY no one gave honey too much thought. It was simply plonked on the table at breakfast time, then tucked away in the pantry until the next day.

But a quiet revolution has been going on at the apiary and it's changing the way we look at honey. The ancient elixir of the gods is now finding its way into bread, beer, tea, haute cuisine and even medicine.

Honey-eating families traditionally opt for clover because it's pale, mild and sweet.

"Mum buys it because the kids eat it," says beekeeper Murray Bush of Blenheim. "It's not too strong."

But at least 13 monofloral honeys are now on the market. They include strong-tasting thyme, aromatic pohutukawa, treacly honeydew (from the excreta of aphids that burrow into New Zealand beech trees), and the slightly bitter but medicinal manuka.

According to an ancient Roman writer, honey was guaranteed to make men "merry and joyful" and give them courage in battle. Modern men buy it for a different reason: to sweeten their tea. "It's my favourite by a long shot," says Bush.

"I mainly put it on toast. But it's perfect in drinks and for cooking, because it dissolves so easily. It's not a strong flavour."

He uses it in bread-making, tweaking recipes to make allowances for honey's extra sweetness and moisture content.

"I experiment and play around," he says. "For European breads I use stronger flavoured honey like manuka. Otherwise I use borage. The bread may not taste as if it has honey in it but it keeps it fresh. I find that home-made bread dries out in a few days. Honey seems to extend its freshness."

Maureen Maxwell, of Beeline Apiaries at Waimauku, got into the honey business a year ago and is now completely preoccupied with it. She is a former chef and partner in Matua Valley Wines. With partner Rikki Robins, she runs 200 beehives.

Although Maxwell is allergic to bee venom after sustaining a number of stings, she has big plans for their honey. Beeline recently introduced butterscotchy chestnut honey after placing hives in local chestnut orchards.

They sometimes gather wild comb honey. They use honey to make white and red honeygars for dripping on to salads, and honey syrup for spooning over fresh fruit.

Maxwell approaches honey as if it were wine. "Honey depends on what the bees have been feeding on, and climatic conditions," she says.

"There is a big difference between freshly harvested honey and honey that has been sitting around for a couple of years. The character changes. It's like wine. Whether it gets better as it ages is a matter of personal choice."

"But honey never goes off. It's full of minerals and vitamins, natural antibiotics and natural preservatives."

Another couple working hard to lift honey's profile to gourmet status are Bill and Sandee Floyd of Marlborough. A couple of years ago they started the New Zealand Honey Advisory Service, encouraging beekeepers to treat honey like wine.

Bill Floyd waxes lyrical about all honeys, even those made from despised rural weeds such as nodding thistle.

"This honey is like a superb, aged riesling," he says. "It's got a very fine grain to it. It's incredibly smooth and silky. It's not oily and it has a lovely, soft, spicy aroma. For me it's amazing — it's got real vanilla-type notes in it."

Thyme, on the other hand, is "the gorgonzola of honeys," according to Floyd's nostrils.

"It really does have an old-socks, sweaty-socks feel to it."

"You expect those things from gorgonzola — but people's experience of honey is pretty simplistic. They expect

mild, sweet honey. Honeys like thyme are real paradigm breakers."

"We do a lot of work with chefs. And, when good chefs taste thyme, they don't see it as something to stick on a bit of toast but something to stick with other ingredients. I've tasted some wonderful sauces made with thyme honey."

It's an ongoing battle with supermarkets, however, to get enough shelf space for all the different monofloral honeys to sit upon.

"Consumers are getting less choice on the shelves, as supermarkets rationalise their products," says Floyd.

On the medicinal side, significant scientific research undertaken by Dr Peter Nolan, associate professor of biochemistry at Waikato University and director of the honey research unit, has pulled honey out of the realms of folklore.

So much so, that some beekeepers apparently call him God. He has discovered that although all honey has antibacterial properties because of its sugar content and a naturally occurring hydrogen peroxide agent, some honeys have a bit extra.

About one third of the manuka honey harvested in New Zealand has an extra herbal antibacterial content, which can be detected only through laboratory testing.

Manuka honey that contains this substance is given a UMF (unique manuka rating), which means that it can be used effectively against some notoriously resistant bacteria.

In Australia, manuka honey and jelly bush honey have been classified as medicine.

It is an effective healing salve for wounds and burns.

"It's a lot cheaper than antiseptics and a lot more effective," says Nolan. "All antiseptics destroy tissues and therefore slow down the rate of healing. Honey doesn't."

He quotes a documented case involving an Englishwoman who had an abscess in her armpit that failed to respond to treatment for 22 years.

"She couldn't move her arm because of the pain," says Nolan. When she applied honey for several weeks, it healed completely.

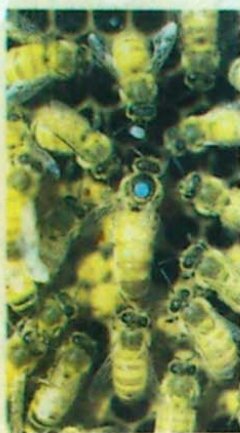
There is more. Anecdotal evidence suggests honey can be beneficial in the treatment of peptic ulcers. And honey is undergoing trials in Christchurch as a method of treating eye infections.

Nolan also travels with honey in his first-aid kit. On a recent trip to Australia, he got sunburn on his head. To treat it, he applied a mixture of honey and butter to his bald spot and by morning all the inflammation had gone.

And there is still more. New research in America, says Nolan, is about to reveal that athletes perform better after a dose of honey than one of sugar or glucose.

"With honey, blood-sugar levels don't peak," he says. "They come in at a lower level and last longer. And this gives better athletic performance."

Despite the agony caused by the Varroa mite, the future for honey looks rather sweet.



HONEY

etc...
maggie blake

Bees may have lost some of their sting but honey is still sweet as ...



THE HIVE LIFE: Maureen Maxwell, of Beeline Apiaries at Waimauku, shifted some hives — each with a queen bee (above left) — to a chestnut orchard, and got butterscotchy chestnut honey. Just like wine, the flavours differ according to climate and what the bees feed on, she says.

HERALD PICTURE: MARK SMITH

